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ABSTRACT

A variety of games for beginning second language learners are described. The games are designed to develop the student's confidence in communicating in the target language and to help establish his interlanguage. They include: a bilingual guessing game, to be played by a learner and a native speaker; a game to match words, pictures, and definitions; a conundrum in the form of a physical puzzle; a description/object guessing game and variations; a geography guessing game; an exercise in reconstructing a story from mixed sentences; and a word/picture matching game. Several related books are listed. (MSE)

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RATIONALE OF CAB

(Communication Activities for Beginners)

Neville Laing

Presented at the JALT (Japan Association of Language Teachers) Conference (September, 1985 in Kyoto, Japan)

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JALT Conference
September 1985
Neville Laing

RATIONALE OF CAB

(Communication Activities for Beginners)

As will have been obvious to those who attended this presentation, the main purpose was to describe and demonstrate these activities - not argue the need for them. The presenter's position implies a total rejection of the audio-lingual view of language as a collection of structures to be mastered by repetitious drilling and the fear that giving learners their linguistic wings (i.e.total freedom as to how they express themselves in the target language) will only encourage them to form indelibly bad language habits from which they will never recover.

Japan - like so many other countries where English is learned in schools as an obligatory if not a compulsory subject - has school courses which seem to have as their basic assumption the one described by Cook, Long and McDonough (1979:9):

> "An L2 learner is expected (in such courses) to have a system that is some fragment of the native system, not a system in its own right (my emphasis), and he is required to learn the language bit by bit. For instance, in learning English as a foreign language, the learner may first be taught the present tense, then the past tense, and so on; each of these tenses corresponds to part of the target language, and after he has covered them all, the learner will have pieced together the tense system of English; he is not, however, allowed to develop a progressively more complicated system of tenses of his own as a native child does."

Barnard and Brown are also impressed with this achievement of the L1 learner:

> "A child of 18 months or two years speaks a little language. His language is smaller in all ways than that of a five year old child. He does not use all the sounds of the adult language, and he uses far fewer ~~words~~s and constructions...However, the language of even a two year old child is...a language, not part of a language. His vocabulary may have twenty words, and his grammar may only consist of putting certain words before others, but he makes known what he wants to make known; his language does what the child needs it to do...It works in an efficient

> way. Each item in it has a purpose, has a function, produces a wanted effect. The range of vocabulary covers every area of the child's needs and responses to persons, activities and things which concern him...Unfortunately, the English of a South-East Asian child who has had only school English lessons may not be a language in this way." (1974:B1-2)

The blame for the sad truth of the closing sentence of the above quotation has to be laid squarely at the door of the school courses which do not, at any stage, allow their learners control over their own "little language." Indeed such courses, with their focus fixed firmly on some far horizon vision of perfect control of the target language rather than on the learner and his communicative needs, offer him fragments of its surface structure (as Cook et al. claim) in the apparent belief that he will eventually amass a sufficient collection of fragments to allow him to piece together the language itself. Evidence of the success of this strategy is rare in Japan;rather the country swarms with examples of its failure .

But also in abundance in Japan are examples of EFL learners who have-independently of language courses and even in spite of them-developed their own "Little (English) Languages" which prove adequate for their needs. Such systems have been referred to variously, and with slightly different emphases as "interlanguages" (Nemser, 1971) and "transitional competences" (Corder, 1975). Schumann (1975) even goes so far as to compare the process by which the learner forms his interlanguage and continually reshapes it so that it develops towards the target language, stage by stage with the evolution of pidgin languages into "creoles" through the developmental stages of "simplification", "reduction", "complication", and "expansion."

An essential task of a language course then is to encourage the learner in his natural task of developing his "interlanguage." Mistakes and apparent "fossilization" should be seen as part of this process - not a possible terminal blight on the learner's language, but evidence that learning is taking place.

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Rationale (3)

The purpose of having communication activities near the beginning of a language course is to encourage learners (as well as teachers) in this view. Early success at communicating in the TL will do more for the learner's confidence than success at a whole battery of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation tests, and will focus his attention from the beginning on the real purpose of studying a foreign language.

But what do you mean by "beginners"?

Obviously "beginners" in this context can hardly mean people who have never heard a word of the target language.

Some activities (e.g. the word-picture-definition game) will require that the majority of the learners (namely those with the words and definitions) can read the target language, while the strip puzzle will require this ability of all participants. The bilingual guessing game is best played if 50% of the participants can read Japanese well and 50% can read English well. Other games, like "Where are my glasses?" can be played if no-one can read the target language.

Another constraint will be the ages of the learners. Small children often cannot see the point in attempting to communicate in a foreign language with other children who share their own native language and will only do this in a small group where the teacher is the focal point.

The Activities to be Demonstrated:

1) The Bilingual Guessing Game (to be played - for demonstration purposes by Gaijin beginners of Japanese and Japanese native speakers)

   Materials:

   (i) an envelope containing English phrases.
   (ii) a backed sheet containing their Japanese equivalents.
   (iii) a key.

   Method:

The Gaijin selects an English phrase from the envelope and attempts to communicate its message in Japanese. When his Japanese

partner understands him sufficiently to recognise the Japanese equivalent on the backed sheet, they note the alphabetical letter of the English phrase and the number of the Japanese equivalent and proceed to the next pair of phrases. Upon finishing, they compare their results with the key provided.

(2) The Word-Picture-Definition Game (To be played in groups of three)

Materials:

(i) a set of pictures of common objects.
(ii) a set of words identifying (i).
(iii) a set of definitions of (ii).
(iv) a key.

Method:

Player A selects a picture and identifies it either by correctly naming it or describing it as best he can. Player B must find the word which names it (e.g. "a cow"). Player C must find the definition. The players should not look at the others' pictures/words/definitions. When satisfied that they are talking about the same object, they note the relevant letters and numbers and continue.

Upon completion, they compare their findings with the key.

(3) Strip Puzzle

Materials:

An envelope containing strips on which are printed sentences which when put together will present a conundrum.

Method:

Each player takes a sentence from the envelope and spends one minute memorising it. Then he returns it to the envelope. The players must solve the problem by listening to one another's sentences and discussing them. Nothing must be written down.

(4) Where are My Glasses?
How Many?
Feelings
Crossroads
Do Me a Favour

From Harrap's Communication Games
(Rules described therein)

Other Communication Activities for "Beginners"

(1) The "What is It" game (Nation, p. 74)

8 sentences describing an object are placed in an envelope. The envelope itself is labelled alphabetically, e.g.

Envelope A would contain the following sentences:

It is thin.
It is black.
It has many teeth.
It is made of plastic.
We can usually find one near a mirror.
It costs Y100.
Everybody uses it.
It is used for combing your hair.

Envelope B:

It is thin.
It is silver.
It has a sharp point.
It is made of steel.
We can usually find one in our house.
It costs one cent.
Usually women use it.
It is used for sewing things.

After several examples, learners should be encouraged to make their own descriptions (by replacing the underlined words and phrases) of objects they themselves think of.

(2) The "Where is It" game (Nation, p. 75)

To identify a country or city, e.g.

It has a warm climate. It has three seasons. They are the wet season, the cool season, and the hot, dry season. It is a medium-sized country. It has a population of 40 million. It sells rice, chicken and pineapples to other countries. It is part of Asia. It is to the north of Malaysia. Its other neighbors are Burma, Laos and Cambodia. The capital city is Bangkok.

(4) Freer Variations of the "What is It" Game

(a) Objects in a bag: These are visible only to Player A, who describes them in his own sentences to Player B who is given them when he identifies them correctly by name.

(b) Pictures on cards: Player A describes the picture to Player B who is given each card he can identify.

(5) A Strip Story (Gibson, 1975)

A now fairly well-known technique - a somewhat easier version of the above strip puzzle. Since we are dealing with beginners, a fairly simple story (one whose lexis and grammatical structure is familiar) can be cut into strips. Each strip is handed to each participant who memorises it and returns it. The learners say their sentences to each other and reassemble the story orally.

(6) Word - Picture (with or without Definition)

Played as a card game like "Snap" when the word matches the picture.

Suggested Books:

Since undertaking this presentation, whose basic premise is the paucity of communication activities designed for beginners, the presenter has discovered a growing number on the market. These include:

(1) Grander, C: Play Games with English
Heinemann, 1981,2,3
(primarily for self-study - adaptable for CAB)

(2) Hadfield, J: Harrap's Communication Games
Harrup, 1984

(3) Nation, I.S.P.: Language Teaching Techniques
English Language Institute, Victoria University of Wellington, N.Z., 1977 (available on request)

(4) Rixon, S: Fun and Games, MacMillan, 1983.

(5) Rogers, J: Group Activities for Language Learning
Occasional Papers 4, RELC, Singapore, 1978 (available from SEAMEO Regional Language Centre, Singapore)

(6) Thomas, G.I.: Communication Activities for Language Learning
English Language Institute, Victoria University of Wellington, N.Z., 1982 (available upon request)

(7) Watcyn Jones, P.: Pair Work (Books A and B), Penguin, 1981.

(8) Watcyn Jones, P.: Pair Work One (Books A and B) Penguin, 1984.

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3. Cook, V.J., Long, J., and McDonough, S.D.: First and Second Language Learning, in Mother Tongue and Other Languages in Education, Perron, G. (ed.), 1979.

4. Corder, S.P.: Error Analysis, Interlanguage and Second Language Acquisition, in Language Teaching and Linguistic Abstracts, C.U.P., 1975

5. Gibson, R. E.: The Strip Story, A Catalyst for Communication, TESOL Q, 92, 1975)

6. Nemser, W.: Approximative Systems of Foreign Language Learners, 1971 in Richards, J. (ed.): Error Analysis, Longman,1974.

7. Schumann, J.H.: Implications of Pidginization and Creolization for the Study of Adult Second Language Acquisition, in Schumann and Stenson, N. (eds.): New Frontiers in Second Language Learning, Newbury House, 1974.

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